Mr. JOHNSON'S

PREFACE

To his EDITION of

Shakeſpear's Plays.

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PREFACE.

THAT praiſes are without reaſon laviſhed on the dead, and that the honours due only to excellence are paid to antiquity, is a complaint likely to be always continued by thoſe, who, being able to add nothing to truth, hope for eminence from the hereſies of paradox; or thoſe, who, being forced by diſappointment upon conſolatory expedients, are willing to hope from poſterity what the preſent age refuſes, and flatter themſelves that the regard which is yet denied by envy, will be at laſt beſtowed by time.

Antiquity, like every other quality that attracts the notice of mankind, has undoubtedly votaries that reverence it, not from reaſon, but from prejudice. Some ſeem to admire indiſcriminately whatever has been long preſerved, without conſidering that time has ſometimes co-operated with chance; all perhaps are more willing to honour paſt than preſent excellence; and the mind contemplates genius through the ſhades of age, as the eye ſurveys the ſun through artificial opacity. The great contention of criticiſm is to find the faults of the moderns, and the beauties of the ancients. While an au-

thour is yet living we eſtimate his powers by his worſt performance, and when he is dead we rate them by his beſt.

To works, however, of which the excellence is not abſolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raiſed upon principles demonſtrative and ſcientifick, but appealing wholly to obſervation and experience, no other teſt can be applied than length of duration and continuance of eſteem. What mankind have long poſſeſſed they have often examined and compared, and if they perſiſt to value the poſſeſſion, it is becauſe frequent compariſons have confirmed opinion in its favour. As among the works of nature no man can properly call a river deep or a mountain high, without the knowledge of many mountains and many rivers; ſo in the productions of genius, nothing can be ſtiled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the ſame kind. Demonſtration immediately diſplays its power, and has nothing to hope or fear from the flux of years; but works tentative and experimental muſt be eſtimated by their proportion to the general and collective ability of man, as it is diſcovered in a long ſucceſſion of endeavours. Of the firſt building that was raiſed, it might be with certainty determined that it was round or ſquare, but whether it was ſpacious or lofty muſt have been referred to time. The Pythagorean ſcale of numbers was at once diſcovered to be perfect; but the poems of *Homer* we yet know not to tranſcend the common limits of human intelligence,

intelligence, but by remarking, that nation after nation, and century after century, has been able to do little more than tranſpoſe his incidents, new name his characters, and paraphraſe his ſentiments.

The reverence due to writings that have long ſubſiſted ariſes therefore not from any credulous confidence in the ſuperior wiſdom of paſt ages, or gloomy perſuaſion of the degeneracy of mankind, but is the conſequence of acknowledged and indubitable poſitions, that what has been longeſt known has been moſt conſidered, and what is moſt conſidered is beſt underſtood.

The Poet, of whoſe works I have undertaken the reviſion, may now begin to aſſume the dignity of an ancient, and claim the privilege of eſtabliſhed fame and preſcriptive veneration. He has long outlived his century, the term commonly fixed as the teſt of literary merit. Whatever advantages he might once derive from perſonal alluſions, local cuſtoms, or temporary opinions, have for many years been loſt; and every topick of merriment or motive of ſorrow, which the modes of artificial life afforded him, now only obſcure the ſcenes which they once illuminated. The effects of favour and competition are at an end; the tradition of his friendſhips and his enmities has periſhed; his works ſupport no opinion with arguments, nor ſupply any faction with invectives; they can neither indulge vanity nor gratify malignity, but are read without any other reaſon than the deſire of pleaſure, and are therefore praiſed only as pleaſure

is obtained; yet, thus unaſſiſted by intereſt or paſſion, they have paſt through variations of taſte and changes of manners, and, as they devolved from one generation to another, have received new honours at every tranſmiſſion.

But becauſe human judgment, though it be gradually gaining upon certainty, never becomes infallible; and approbation, though long continued, may yet be only the approbation of prejudice or faſhion; it is proper to inquire, by what peculiarities of excellence *Shakeſpeare* has gained and kept the favour of his countrymen.

Nothing can pleaſe many, and pleaſe long, but juſt repreſentations of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight a-while, by that novelty of which the common ſatiety of life ſends us all in queſt; but the pleaſures of ſudden wonder are ſoon exhauſted, and the mind can only repoſe on the ſtability of truth.

Shakeſpeare is above all writers, at leaſt above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirrour of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the cuſtoms of particular places, unpractiſed by the reſt of the world; by the peculiarities of ſtudies or profeſſions, which can operate but upon ſmall numbers; or by the accidents of tranſient faſhions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny

geny of common humanity, ſuch as the world will always ſupply, and obſervation will always find. His perſons act and ſpeak by the influence of thoſe general paſſions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole ſyſtem of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in thoſe of *Shakeſpeare* it is commonly a ſpecies.

It is from this wide extenſion of deſign that ſo much inſtruction is derived. It is this which fills the plays of *Shakeſpeare* with practical axioms and domeſtick wiſdom. It was ſaid of *Euripides*, that every verſe was a precept; and it may be ſaid of *Shakeſpeare*, that from his works may be collected a ſyſtem of civil and œconomical prudence. Yet his real power is not ſhown in the ſplendour of particular paſſages, but by the progreſs of his fable, and, the tenour of his dialogue; and he that tries to recommend him by ſelect quotations, will ſucceed like the pedant in *Hierocles*, who, when he offered his houſe to ſale, carried a brick in his pocket as a ſpecimen.

It will not eaſily be imagined how much *Shakeſpeare* excells in accommodating his ſentiments to real life, but by comparing him with other authours. It was obſerved of the ancient ſchools of declamation, that the more diligently they were frequented, the more was the ſtudent diſqualified for the world, becauſe he found nothing there which he ſhould ever meet in any other place. The ſame remark may be applied to every ſtage but that of *Shakeſpeare*. The

theatre,

theatre, when it is under any other direction, is peopled by ſuch characters as were never ſeen, converſing in a language which was never heard, upon topicks which will never ariſe in the commerce of mankind. But the dialogue of this authour is often ſo evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is purſued with ſo much eaſe and ſimplicity, that it ſeems ſcarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent ſelection out of common converſation, and common occurrences.

Upon every other ſtage the univerſal agent is love, by whoſe power all good and evil is diſtributed, and every action quickened or retarded. To bring a lover, a lady and a rival into the fable; to entangle them in contradictory obligations, perplex them with oppoſitions of intereſt, and harraſs them with violence of deſires inconſiſtent with each other; to make them meet in rapture and part in agony; to fill their mouths with hyperbolical joy and outrageous ſorrow; to diſtreſs them as nothing human ever was diſtreſſed; to deliver them as nothing human ever was delivered, is the buſineſs of a modern dramatiſt. For this probability is violated, life is miſrepreſented, and language is depraved. But love is only one of many paſſions, and as it has no great influence upon the ſum of life, it has little operation in the dramas of a poet, who caught his ideas from the living world, and exhibited only what he ſaw before him. He knew, that any other paſſion, as it was

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regular or exorbitant, was a cauſe of happineſs or calamity.

Characters thus ample and general were not eaſily diſcriminated and preſerved, yet perhaps no poet ever kept his perſonages more diſtinct from each other. I will not ſay with *Pope*, that every ſpeech may be aſſigned to the proper ſpeaker, becauſe many ſpeeches there are which have nothing characteriſtical; but, perhaps, though ſome may be equally adapted to every perſon, it will be difficult to find, any that can be properly transferred from the preſent poſſeſſor to another claimant. The choice is right, when there is reaſon for choice.

Other dramatiſts can only gain attention by hyperbolical or aggravated characters, by fabulous and unexampled excellence or depravity, as the writers of barbarous romances invigorated the reader by a giant and a dwarf; and he that ſhould form his expectations of human affairs from the play, or from the tale, would be equally deceived. *Shakeſpeare* has no heroes; his ſcenes are occupied only by men, who act and ſpeak as the reader thinks that he ſhould himſelf have ſpoken or acted on the ſame occaſion: Even where the agency is ſupernatural the dialogue is level with life. Other writers diſguiſe the moſt natural paſſions and moſt frequent incidents; ſo that he who contemplates them in the book will not know them in the world: *Shakeſpeare* approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful; the event which he repreſents will not happen, but if it were

poſſible,

poſſible, its effects would be probably ſuch as he has aſſigned; and it may be ſaid, that he has not only ſhewn human nature as it acts in real exigences, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be expoſed.

This therefore is the praiſe of *Shakeſpeare*, that his drama is the mirrour of life; that he who has mazed his imagination, in following the phantoms which other writers raiſe up before him, may here be cured of his delirious extaſies, by reading human ſentiments in human language; by ſcenes from which a hermit may eſtimate the tranſactions of the world, and a confeſſor predict the progreſs of the paſſions.

His adherence to general nature has expoſed him to the cenſure of criticks, who form their judgments upon narrower principles. *Dennis* and *Rhymer* think his *Romans* not ſufficiently Roman; and *Voltaire* cenſures his kings as not completely royal. *Dennis* is offended, that *Menenius*, a ſenator of *Rome*, ſhould play the buffoon; and *Voltaire* perhaps thinks decency violated when the *Daniſh* Uſurper is repreſented as a drunkard. But *Shakeſpeare* always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preſerves the eſſential character, is not very careful of diſtinctions ſuperinduced and adventitious. His ſtory requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men. He knew that *Rome*, like every other city, had men of all diſpoſitions; and wanting a buffoon, he went into the ſenate-houſe for that which the ſenate-houſe would certainly have afforded him. He was inclined to ſhew

an uſurper and a murderer not only odious but deſpicable, he therefore added drunkenneſs to his other qualities, knowing that kings love wine like other men, and that wine exerts its natural power upon kings. Theſe are the petty cavils of petty minds; a poet overlooks the caſual diſtinction of country and condition, as a painter, ſatisfied with the figure, neglects the drapery.

The cenſure which he has incurred by mixing comick and tragick ſcenes, as it extends to all his works, deſerves more conſideration. Let the fact be firſt ſtated, and then examined.

Shakeſpeare's plays are not in the rigorous or critical ſenſe either tragedies or comedies, but compoſitions of a diſtinct kind; exhibiting the real ſtate of ſublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and ſorrow, mingled with endleſs variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expreſſing the courſe of the world, in which the loſs of one is the gain of another; in which, at the ſame time, the reveller is haſting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is ſometimes defeated by the frolick of another; and many miſchiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without deſign.

Out of this chaos of mingled purpoſes and caſualties the ancient poets, according to the laws which cuſtom had preſcribed, ſelected ſome the crimes of men, and ſome their abſurdities; ſome the momentous viciſſitudes of life, and ſome the lighter occurrences;

rences; ſome the terrours of diſtreſs, and ſome the gayeties of proſperity. Thus roſe the two modes of imitation, known by the names of *tragedy* and *comedy*, compoſitions intended to promote different ends by contrary means, and conſidered as ſo little allied, that I do not recollect among the *Greeks* or *Romans* a ſingle writer who attempted both.

Shakeſpeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and ſorrow not only in one mind but in one compoſition. Almoſt all his plays are divided between ſerious and ludicrous characters, and, in the ſucceſſive evolutions of the deſign, ſometimes produce ſerioufneſs and ſorrow, and ſometimes levity and laughter.

That this is a practice contrary to the rules of criticiſm will be readily allowed; but there is always an appeal open from criticiſm to nature. The end of writing is to inſtruct; the end of poetry is to inſtruct by pleaſing. That the mingled drama may convey all the inſtruction of tragedy or comedy cannot be denied, becauſe it includes both in its alteration of exhibition, and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life, by ſhewing how great machinations and ſlender deſigns may promote or obviate one another, and the high and the low co-operate in the general ſyſtem by unavoidable concatenation.

It is objected, that by this change of ſcenes the paſſions are interrupted in their progreſſion, and that the principal event, being not advanced by a due gradation of preparatory incidents, wants at laſt the pow-

power to move, which conſtitutes the perfection of dramatick poetry. This reaſoning is ſo ſpecious, that it is received as true even by thoſe who in daily experience feel it to be falſe. The interchanges of mingled ſcenes ſeldom fail to produce the intended viciſſitudes of paſſion. Fiction cannot move ſo much, but that the attention may be eaſily transferred; and though it muſt be allowed that pleaſing melancholy be ſometimes interrupted by unwelcome levity, yet let it be conſidered likewiſe, that melancholy is often not pleaſing, and that the diſturbance of one man may be the relief of another; that different auditors have different habitudes; and that, upon the whole, all pleaſure conſiſts in variety.

The players, who in their edition divided our authour's works into comedies, hiſtories, and tragedies, ſeem not to have diſtinguiſhed the three kinds, by any very exact or definite ideas.

An action which ended happily to the principal perſons, however ſerious or diſtreſsful through its intermediate incidents, in their opinion conſtituted a comedy. This idea of a comedy continued long amongſt us, and plays were written, which, by changing the cataſtrophe, were tragedies to-day and comedies to-morrow.

Tragedy was not in thoſe times a poem of more general dignity or elevation than comedy; it required only a calamitous concluſion, with which the common criticiſm of that age was ſatisfied, whatever lighter pleaſure it afforded in its progreſs.

Hiſtory was a ſeries of actions, with no other than chronological ſucceſſion, independent of each other, and without any tendency to introduce or regulate the concluſion. It is not always very nicely diſtinguiſhed from tragedy. There is not much nearer approach to unity of action in the tragedy of *Antony and Cleopatra*, than in the hiſtory of *Richard the Second*. But a hiſtory might be continued through many plays; as it had no plan, it had no limits.

Through all theſe denominations of the drama, *Shakeſpeare*'s mode of compoſition is the ſame; an interchange of ſerioufneſs and merriment, by which the mind is ſoftened at one time, and exhilarated at another. But whatever be his purpoſe, whether to gladden or depreſs, or to conduct the ſtory, without vehemence or emotion, through tracts of eaſy and familiar dialogue, he never fails to attain his purpoſe; as he commands us, we laugh or mourn, or ſit ſilent with quiet expectation, in tranquillity without indifference.

When *Shakeſpeare*'s plan is underſtood, moſt of the criticiſms of *Rhymer* and *Voltaire* vaniſh away. The play of *Hamlet* is opened, without impropriety, by two ſentinels; *Iago* bellows at *Brabantio*'s window, without injury to the ſcheme of the play, though in terms which a modern audience would not eaſily endure; the character of *Polonius* is ſeaſonable and uſeful; and the Grave-diggers themſelves may be heard with applauſe.

Shakeſpeare

Shakeſpeare engaged in dramatick poetry with the world open before him; the rules of the ancients were yet known to few; the publick judgment was unformed; he had no example of ſuch fame as might force him upon imitation, nor criticks of ſuch authority as might reſtrain his extravagance: He therefore indulged his natural diſpoſition, and his diſpoſition, as *Rhymer* has remarked, led him to comedy. In tragedy he often writes with great appearance of toil and ſtudy, what is written at laſt with little felicity; but in his comick ſcenes, he ſeems to produce without labour, what no labour can improve. In tragedy he is always ſtruggling after ſome occaſion to be comick, but in comedy he ſeems to repoſe, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature. In his tragick ſcenes there is always ſomething wanting, but his comedy often ſurpaſſes expectation or deſire. His comedy pleaſes by the thoughts and the language, and his tragedy for the greater part by incident and action. His tragedy ſeems to be ſkill, his comedy to be inſtinct.

The force of his comick ſcenes has ſuffered little diminution from the changes made by a century and a half, in manners or in words. As his perſonages act upon principles ariſing from genuine paſſion, very little modified by particular forms, their pleaſures and vexations are communicable to all times and to all places; they are natural, and therefore durable; the adventitious peculiarities of perſonal habits, are only ſuperficial dies, bright and pleaſing for a little

while, yet ſoon fading to a dim tinct, without any remains of former luſtre; but the diſcriminations of true paſſion are the colours of nature; they pervade the whole maſs, and can only periſh with the body that exhibits them. The accidental compoſitions of heterogeneous modes are diſſolved by the chance which combined them; but the uniform ſimplicity of primitive qualities neither admits increaſe, nor ſuffers decay. The ſand heaped by one flood is ſcattered by another, but the rock always continues in its place. The ſtream of time, which is continually waſhing the diſſoluble fabricks of other poets, paſſes without injury by the adamant of *Shakeſpeare*.

If there be, what I believe there is, in every nation, a ſtile which never becomes obſolete, a certain mode of phraſeology ſo conſonant and congenial to the analogy and principles of its reſpective language as to remain ſettled and unaltered; this ſtile is probably to be ſought in the common intercourſe of life, among thoſe who ſpeak only to be underſtood, without ambition of elegance. The polite are always catching modiſh innovations, and the learned depart from eſtabliſhed forms of ſpeech, in hope of finding or making better; thoſe who wiſh for diſtinction forſake the vulgar, when the vulgar is right; but there is a converſation above groſſneſs and below refinement, where propriety reſides, and where this poet ſeems to have gathered his comick dialogue. He is therefore more agreeable to the ears of the preſent age than any other authour equally remote, and among his other excellencies

lencies deſerves to be ſtudied as one of the original maſters of our language.

Theſe obſervations are to be conſidered not as unexceptionably conſtant, but as containing general and predominant truth. *Shakeſpeare*'s familiar dialogue is affirmed to be ſmooth and clear, yet not wholly without ruggedneſs or difficulty; as a country may be eminently fruitful, though it has ſpots unfit for cultivation: His characters are praiſed as natural, though their ſentiments are ſometimes forced, and their actions improbable; as the earth upon the whole is ſpherical, though its ſurface is varied with protuberances and cavities.

Shakeſpeare with his excellencies has likewiſe faults, and faults ſufficient to obſcure and overwhelm any other merit. I ſhall ſhew them in the proportion in which they appear to me, without envious malignity or ſuperſtitious veneration. No queſtion can be more innocently diſcuſſed than a dead poet's pretenſions to renown; and little regard is due to that bigotry which ſets candour higher than truth.

His firſt defect is that to which may be imputed moſt of the evil in books or in men. He ſacrifices virtue to convenience, and is ſo much more careful to pleaſe than to inſtruct, that he ſeems to write without any moral purpoſe. From his writings indeed a ſyſtem of ſocial duty may be ſelected, for he that thinks reaſonably muſt think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop caſually from him; he makes no juſt diſtribution of good or evil, nor is al-

ways careful to ſhew in the virtuous a diſapprobation of the wicked; he carries his perſons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the cloſe diſmiſſes them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and juſtice is a virtue independant on time or place.

The plots are often ſo looſely formed, that a very ſlight conſideration may improve them, and ſo careleſsly purſued, that he ſeems not always fully to comprehend his own deſign. He omits opportunities of inſtructing or delighting which the train of his ſtory ſeems to force upon him, and apparently rejects thoſe exhibitions which would be more affecting, for the ſake of thoſe which are more eaſy.

It may be obſerved, that in many of his plays the latter part is evidently neglected. When he found himſelf near the end of his work, and, in view of his reward, he ſhortened the labour, to ſnatch the profit. He therefore remits his efforts where he ſhould moſt vigorouſly exert them, and his cataſtrophe is improbably produced or imperfectly repreſented.

He had no regard to diſtinction of time or place, but gives to one age or nation, without ſcruple, the cuſtoms, inſtitutions, and opinions of another, at the expence not only of likelihood, but of poſſibility. Theſe faults *Pope* has endeavoured, with more zeal than judgment, to transfer to his imagined interpolators. We need not wonder to find *Hector* quoting

quoting *Ariſtotle*, when we ſee the loves of *Theſeus* and *Hippolyta* combined with the *Gothick* mythology of fairies. *Shakeſpeare*, indeed, was not the only violator of chronology, for in the ſame age *Sidney*, who wanted not the advantages of learning, has, in his *Arcadia*, confounded the paſtoral with the feudal times, the days of innocence, quiet and ſecurity, with thoſe of turbulence, violence and adventure.

In his comick ſcenes he is ſeldom very ſucceſsful, when he engages his characters in reciprocations of ſmartneſs and conteſt of ſarcaſm; their jeſts are commonly groſs, and their pleaſantry licentious; neither his gentlemen nor his ladies have much delicacy, nor are ſufficiently diſtinguiſhed from his clowns by any appearance of refined manners. Whether he repreſented the real converſation of his time is not eaſy to determine; the reign of *Elizabeth* is commonly ſuppoſed to have been a time of ſtatelineſs, formality and reſerve, yet perhaps the relaxations of that ſeverity were not very elegant. There muſt, however, have been always ſome modes of gayety preferable to others, and a writer ought to chuſe the beſt.

In tragedy his performance ſeems conſtantly to be worſe, as his labour is more. The effuſions of paſſion which exigence forces out are for the moſt part ſtriking and energetick; but whenever he ſolicits his invention, or ſtrains his faculties, the offspring of his throes is tumour, meanneſs, tedioufneſs, and obſcurity.

In narration he affects a diſproportionate pomp of diction and a wearisome train of circumlocution, and tells the incident imperfectly in many words, which might have been more plainly delivered in few. Narration in dramatick poetry is naturally tedious, as it is unanimated and inactive, and obſtructs the progreſs of the action; it ſhould therefore always be rapid, and enlivened by frequent interruption. *Shakeſpeare* found it an encumbrance, and inſtead of lightening it by brevity, endeavoured to recommend it by dignity and ſplendour.

His declamations or ſet ſpeeches are commonly cold and weak, for his power was the power of nature; when he endeavoured, like other tragick writers, to catch opportunities of amplification, and inſtead of inquiring what the occaſion demanded, to ſhow how much his ſtores of knowledge could ſupply, he ſeldom eſcapes without the pity or reſentment of his reader.

It is incident to him to be now and then entangled with an unwieldy ſentiment, which he cannot well expreſs, and will not reject; he ſtruggles with it a while, and if it continues ſtubborn, compriſes it in words ſuch as occur, and leaves it to be diſentangled and evolved by thoſe who have more leiſure to beſtow upon it.

Not that always where the language is intricate the thought is ſubtle, or the image always great where the line is bulky; the equality of words to things is very often neglected, and trivial ſentiments and

vulgar

vulgar ideas diſappoint the attention, to which they are recommended by ſonorous epithets and ſwelling figures.

But the admirers of this great poet have never leſs reaſon to indulge their hopes of ſupreme excellence, than when he ſeems fully reſolved to ſink them in dejection, and mollify them with tender emotions by the fall of greatneſs, the danger of innocence, or the croſſes of love. He is not long ſoft and pathetick without ſome idle conceit, or contemptible equivocation. He no ſooner begins to move, than he counteracts himſelf; and terrour and pity, as they are riſing in the mind, are checked and blaſted by ſudden frigidity.

A quibble is to *Shakeſpeare*, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures, it is ſure to lead him out of his way, and ſure to engulf him in the mire. It has ſome malignant power over his mind, and its faſcinations are irreſiſtible. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of his diſquiſition, whether he be enlarging knowledge or exalting affection, whether he be amuſing attention with incidents, or enchaining it in ſuſpenſe, let but a quibble ſpring up before him, and he leaves his work unfiniſhed. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aſide from his career, or ſtoop from his elevation. A quibble poor and barren as it is, gave him ſuch delight, that he was content to purchaſe it, by the ſacrifice of reaſon, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal

Cleopatra for which he loſt the world, and was content to loſe it.

It will be thought ſtrange, that, in enumerating the defects of this writer, I have not yet mentioned his neglect of the unities; his violation of thoſe laws which have been inſtituted and eſtabliſhed by the joint authority of poets and of criticks.

For his other deviations from the art of writing, I reſign him to critical juſtice, without making any other demand in his favour, than that which muſt be indulged to all human excellence; that his virtues be rated with his failings: But, from the cenſure which this irregularity may bring upon him, I ſhall, with due reverence to that learning which I muſt oppoſe, adventure to try how I can defend him.

His hiſtories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not ſubject to any of their laws; nothing more is neceſſary to all the praiſe which they expect, than that the changes of action be ſo prepared as to be underſtood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters conſiſtent, natural and diſtinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is to be ſought.

In his other works he has well enough preſerved the unity of action. He has not, indeed, an intrigue regularly perplexed and regularly unravelled; he does not endeavour to hide his deſign only to diſcover it, for this is ſeldom the order of real events, and *Shakeſpeare* is the poet of nature: But his plan has commonly what *Ariſtotle* requires, a beginning, a middle,

and an end; one event is concatenated with another, and the concluſion follows by eaſy conſequence. There are perhaps ſome incidents that might be ſpared, as in other poets there is much talk that only fills up time upon the ſtage; but the general ſyſtem makes gradual advances, and the end of the play is the end of expectation.

To the unities of time and place he has ſhewn no regard, and perhaps a nearer view of the principles on which they ſtand will diminiſh their value, and withdraw from them the veneration which, from the time of *Corneille*, they have very generally received by diſcovering that they have given more trouble to the poet, than pleaſure to the auditor.

The neceſſity of obſerving the unities of time and place ariſes from the ſuppoſed neceſſity of making the drama credible. The criticks hold it impoſſible, that an action of months or years can be poſſibly believed to paſs in three hours; or that the ſpectator can ſuppoſe himſelf to ſit in the theatre, while ambaſſadors go and return between diſtant kings, while armies are levied and towns beſieged, while an exile wanders and returns, or till he whom they ſaw courting his miſtreſs, ſhall lament the untimely fall of his ſon. The mind revolts from evident falſehood, and fiction loſes its force when it departs from the reſemblance of reality.

From the narrow limitation of time neceſſarily ariſes the contraction of place. The ſpectator, who knows that he ſaw the firſt act at *Alexandria*, cannot

ſuppoſe

ſuppoſe that he ſees the next at *Rome*, at a diſtance to which not the dragons of *Medea* could, in ſo ſhort a time, have tranſported him; he knows with certainty that he has not changed his place; and he knows that place cannot change itſelf; that what was a houſe cannot become a plain; that what was *Thebes* can never be *Perſepolis*.

Such is the triumphant language with which a critick exults over the miſery of an irregular poet, and exults commonly without reſiſtance or reply. It is time therefore to tell him, by the authority of *Shakeſpeare*, that he aſſumes, as an unqueſtionable principle, a poſition, which, while his breath is forming it into words, his underſtanding pronounces to be falſe. It is falſe, that any repreſentation is miſtaken for reality; that any dramatick fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a ſingle moment, was ever credited.

The objection ariſing from the impoſſibility of paſſing the firſt hour at *Alexandria*, and the next at *Rome*, ſuppoſes, that when the play opens the ſpectator really imagines himſelf at *Alexandria*, and believes that his walk to the theatre has been a voyage to *Egypt*, and that he lives in the days of *Antony* and *Cleopatra*. Surely he that imagines this, may imagine more. He that can take the ſtage at one time for the palace of the *Ptolemies*, may take it in half an hour for the promontory of *Actium*. Deluſion, if deluſion be admitted, has no certain limitation; if the ſpectator can be once perſuaded, that his old acquaintance are

Alexander

Alexander and *Cæſar*, that a room illuminated with candles is the plain of *Pharſalia*, or the bank of *Granicus*, he is in a ſtate of elevation above the reach of reaſon, or of truth, and from the heights of empyrean poetry, may deſpiſe the circumſcriptions of terreſtrial nature. There is no reaſon why a mind thus wandering in extaſy ſhould count the clock, or why an hour ſhould not be a century in that calenture of the brains that can make the ſtage a field.

The truth is, that the ſpectators are always in their ſenſes, and know, from the firſt act to the laſt, that the ſtage is only a ſtage, and that the players are only players. They come to hear a certain number of lines recited with juſt geſture and elegant modulation. The lines relate to ſome action, and an action muſt be in ſome place; but the different actions that compleat a ſtory may be in places very remote from each other; and where is the abſurdity of allowing that ſpace to repreſent firſt *Athens*, and then *Sicily*, which was always known to be neither *Sicily* nor *Athens*, but a modern theatre.

By ſuppoſition, as place is introduced, time may be extended; the time required by the fable elapſes for the moſt part between the acts; for, of ſo much of the action as is repreſented, the real and poetical duration is the ſame. If, in the firſt act, preparations for war againſt *Mithridates* are repreſented to be made in *Rome*, the event of the war may, without abſurdity, be repreſented, in the cataſtrophe, as happening in *Pontus*; we know that there is neither

war,

war, nor preparation for war; we know that we are neither in *Rome* nor *Pontus*; that neither *Mithridates* nor *Lucullus* are before us. The drama exhibits ſucceſſive imitations of ſucceſſive actions, and why may not the ſecond imitation repreſent an action that happened years after the firſt; if it be ſo connected with it, that nothing but time can be ſuppoſed to intervene. Time is, of all modes of exiſtence, moſt obſequious to the imagination; a lapſe of years is as eaſily conceived as a paſſage of hours. In contemplation we eaſily contract the time of real actions, and therefore willingly permit it to be contracted when we only ſee their imitation.

It will be aſked, how the drama moves, if it is not credited. It is credited with all the credit due to a drama. It is credited, whenever it moves, as a juſt picture of a real original; as repreſenting to the auditor what he would himſelf feel, if he were to do or ſuffer what is there feigned to be ſuffered or to be done. The reflection that ſtrikes the heart is not, that the evils before us are real evils, but that they are evils to which we ourſelves may be expoſed. If there be any fallacy, it is not that we fancy the players, but that we fancy ourſelves unhappy for a moment; but we rather lament the poſſibility than ſuppoſe the preſence of miſery, as a mother weeps over her babe, when ſhe remembers that death may take it from her. The delight of tragedy proceeds from our conſciouſneſs of fiction; if we thought murders and treaſons real, they would pleaſe no more.

Imitations

Imitations produce pain or pleaſure, not becauſe they are miſtaken for realities, but becauſe they bring realities to mind. When the imagination is recreated by a painted landſcape, the trees are not ſuppoſed capable to give us ſhade, or the fountains coolneſs; but we conſider, how we ſhould be pleaſed with ſuch fountains playing beſide us, and ſuch woods waving over us. We are agitated in reading the hiſtory of *Henry* the Fifth, yet no man takes his book for the field of *Agencourt*. A dramatick exhibition is a book recited with concomitants that encreaſe or diminiſh its effect. Familiar comedy is often more powerful on the theatre, than in the page; imperial tragedy is always leſs. The humour of *Petruchio* may be heightened by grimace; but what voice or what geſture can hope to add dignity or force to the ſoliloquy of *Cato*.

A play read, affects the mind like a play acted. It is therefore evident, that the action is not ſuppoſed to be real, and it follows that between the acts a longer or ſhorter time may be allowed to paſs, and that no more account of ſpace or duration is to be taken by the auditor of a drama, than by the reader of a narrative, before whom may paſs in an hour the life of a hero, or the revolutions of an empire.

Whether *Shakeſpeare* knew the unities, and rejected them by deſign, or deviated from them by happy ignorance, it is, I think, impoſſible to decide, and uſeleſs to inquire. We may reaſonably ſuppoſe, that, when he roſe to notice, he did not want the

counſels

counſels and admonitions of ſcholars and crticks, and that he at laſt deliberately perſiſted in a practice, which he might have begun by chance. As nothing is eſſential to the fable, but unity of action, and as the unities of time and place ariſe evidently from falſe aſſumptions, and, by circumſcribing the extent of the drama, leſſen its variety, I cannot think it much to be lamented, that they were not known by him, or not obſerved: Nor, if ſuch another poet could ariſe, ſhould I very vehemently reproach him, that his firſt act paſſed at *Venice*, and his next in *Cyprus*. Such violations of rules merely poſitive, become the comprehenſive genius of *Shakeſpeare*, and ſuch cenſures are ſuitable to the minute and ſlender criticiſm of *Voltaire*:

Non uſque adeo permiſcuit imis
Longus ſumma dies, ut non, ſi voce Metelli
Serventur leges, malint a Cæſare tolli.

Yet when I ſpeak thus ſlightly of dramatick rules, I cannot but recollect how much wit and learning may be produced againſt me; before ſuch authorities I am afraid to ſtand, not that I think the preſent queſtion one of thoſe that are to be decided by mere authority, but becauſe it is to be ſuſpected, that theſe precepts have not been ſo eaſily received but for better reaſons than I have yet been able to find. The reſult of my enquiries, in which it would be ludicrous to boaſt of impartiality, is, that the unities of time and place are not eſſential to a juſt dra-

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ma, that though they may ſometimes conduce to pleaſure, they are always to be ſacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and inſtruction; and that a play, written with nice obſervation of critical rules, is to be contemplated as an elaborate curioſity, as the product of ſuperfluous and oſtentatious art, by which is ſhewn, rather what is poſſible, than what is neceſſary.

He that, without diminution of any other excellence, ſhall preſerve all the unities unbroken, deſerves the like applauſe with the architect, who ſhall diſplay all the orders of architecture in a citadel, without any deduction from its ſtrength; but the principal beauty of a citadel is to exclude the enemy; and the greateſt graces of a play, are to copy nature and inſtruct life.

Perhaps, what I have here not dogmatically but deliberately written, may recal the principles of the drama to a new examination. I am almoſt frighted at my own temerity; and when I eſtimate the fame and the ſtrength of thoſe that maintain the contrary opinion, am ready to ſink down in reverential ſilence; as *Æneas* withdrew from the defence of *Troy*, when he ſaw *Neptune* ſhaking the wall, and *Juno* heading the beſiegers.

Thoſe whom my arguments cannot perſuade to give their approbation to the judgment of *Shakeſpeare*, will eaſily, if they conſider the condition of his life, make ſome allowance for his ignorance.

Every man's performances, to be rightly eſtimated, muſt be compared with the ſtate of the age in which

which he lived, and with his own particular opportunities; and though to the reader a book be not worſe or better for the circumſtances of the authour, yet as there is always a ſilent reference of human works to human abilities, and as the enquiry, how far man may extend his deſigns, or how high he may rate his native force, is of far greater dignity than in what rank we ſhall place any particular performance, curioſity is always buſy to diſcover the inſtruments, as well as to ſurvey the workmanſhip, to know how much is to be aſcribed to original powers, and how much to caſual and adventitious help. The palaces of *Peru* or *Mexico* were certainly mean and incommodious habitations, if compared to the houſes of *European* monarchs; yet who could forbear to view them with aſtoniſhment, who remembered that they were built without the uſe of iron?

The *Engliſh* nation, in the time of *Shakeſpeare*, was yet ſtruggling to emerge from barbarity. The philology of *Italy* had been tranſplanted hither in the reign of *Henry* the Eighth; and the learned languages had been ſucceſsfully cultivated by *Lilly*, *Linacer*, and *More*; by *Pole*, *Cheke*, and *Gardiner*; and afterwards by *Smith*, *Clerk*, *Haddon*, and *Aſcham*. Greek was now tought to boys in the principal ſchools; and thoſe who united elegance with learning, read, with great diligence, the *Italian* and *Spaniſh* poets. But literature was yet confined to profeſſed ſcholars, or to men and women of high rank. The publick was groſs and dark; and to be able to read and write, was an accompliſhment ſtill valued for its rarity. Nations,

Nations, like individuals, have their infancy. A people newly awakened to literary curioſity, being yet unacquainted with the true ſtate of things, knows not how to judge of that which is propoſed as its reſemblance. Whatever is remote from common appearances is always welcome to vulgar, as to childiſh credulity; and of a country unenlightened by learning, the whole people is the vulgar. The ſtudy of thoſe who then aſpired to plebeian learning was laid out upon adventures, giants, dragons, and enchantments. *The Death of Arthur* was the favourite volume.

The mind, which has feaſted on the luxurious wonders of fiction, has no taſte of the inſipidity of truth. A play which imitated only the common occurrences of the world, would, upon the admirers of *Palmerin* and *Guy* of *Warwick*, have made little impreſſion; he that wrote for ſuch an audience was under the neceſſity of looking round for ſtrange events and fabulous tranſactions, and that incredibility, by which maturer knowledge is offended, was the chief recommendation of writings, to unſkilful curioſity.

Our authour's plots are generally borrowed from novels, and it is reaſonable to ſuppoſe, that he choſe the moſt popular, ſuch as were read by many, and related by more; for his audience could not have followed him through the intricacies of the drama, had they not held the thread of the ſtory in their hands.

The ſtories, which we now find only in remoter authours, were in his time acceſſible and familliar.

The fable of *As you like it*, which is ſuppoſed to be copied from *Chaucer*'s Gamelyn, was a little pamphlet of thoſe times; and old Mr. *Cibber* remembered the tale of *Hamlet* in plain *Engliſh* proſe, which the criticks have now to ſeek in *Saxo Grammaticus*.

His *Engliſh* hiſtories he took from *Engliſh* chronicles and *Engliſh* ballads; and as the ancient writers were made known to his countrymen by verſions, they ſupplied him with new ſubjects; he dilated ſome of *Plutarch*'s lives into plays, when they had been tranſlated by *North*.

His plots, whether hiſtorical or fabulous, are always crouded with incidents, by which the attention of a rude people was more eaſily caught than by ſentiment or argumentation; and ſuch is the power of the marvellous even over thoſe who deſpiſe it, that every man finds his mind more ſtrongly ſeized by the tragedies of *Shakeſpeare* than of any other writer; others pleaſe us by particular ſpeeches, but he always makes us anxious for the event, and has perhaps excelled all but *Homer* in ſecuring the firſt purpoſe of a writer, by exciting reſtleſs and unquenchable curioſity, and compelling him that reads his work to read it through.

The ſhows and buſtle with which his plays abound have the ſame original. As knowledge advances, pleaſure paſſes from the eye to the ear, but returns as it declines, from the ear to the eye. Thoſe to whom our authour's labours were exhibited had more ſkill in pomps or proceſſions than in poetical language,

and perhaps wanted ſome viſible and diſcriminated events, as comments on the dialogue. He knew how he ſhould moſt pleaſe; and whether his practice is more agreeable to nature, or whether his example has prejudiced the nation, we ſtill find that on our ſtage ſomething muſt be done as well as ſaid, and inactive declamation is very coldly heard, however muſical or elegant, paſſionate or ſublime.

Voltaire expreſſes his wonder, that our authour's extravagancies are endured by a nation, which has ſeen the tragedy of *Cato*. Let him be anſwered, that *Addiſon* ſpeaks the language of poets, and *Shakeſpeare*, of men. We find in *Cato* innumerable beauties which enamour us of its authour, but we ſee nothing that acquaints us with human ſentiments or human actions; we place it with the faireſt and the nobleſt progeny which judgment propagates by conjunction with learning, but *Othello* is the vigorous and vivacious offſpring of obſervation impregnated by genius. *Cato* affords a ſplendid exhibition of artificial and fictitious manners, and delivers juſt and noble ſentiments, in diction eaſy, elevated and harmonious, but its hopes and fears communicate no vibration to the heart; the compoſition refers us only to the writer; we pronounce the name of *Cato*, but we think on *Addiſon*.

The work of a correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted, varied with ſhades, and ſcented with flowers; the compoſition of *Shakeſpeare* is a foreſt, in which oaks extend

their branches, and pines tower in the air, interſperſed ſometimes with weeds and brambles, and ſometimes giving ſhelter to myrtles and to roſes; filling the eye with awful pomp, and gratifying the mind with endleſs diverſity. Other poets diſplay cabinets of precious rarities, minutely finiſhed, wrought into ſhape, and poliſhed unto brightneſs. *Shakeſpeare* opens a mine which contains gold and diamonds in unexhauſtible plenty, though clouded by incruſtations, debaſed by impurities, and mingled with a maſs of meaner minerals.

It has been much diſputed, whether *Shakeſpeare* owed his excellence to his own native force, or whether he had the common helps of ſcholaſtick education, the precepts of critical ſcience, and the examples of ancient authours.

There has always prevailed a tradition, that *Shakeſpeare* wanted learning, that he had no regular education, nor much ſkill in the dead languages. *Johnſon*, his friend, affirms, that *he had ſmall Latin, and no Greek*; who, beſides that he had no imaginable temptation to falſehood, wrote at a time when the character and acquiſitions of *Shakeſpeare* were known to multitudes. His evidence ought therefore to decide the controverſy, unleſs ſome teſtimony of equal force could be oppoſed.

Some have imagined, that they have diſcovered deep learning in many imitations of old writers; but the examples which I have known urged, were drawn from books tranſlated in his time; or were

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ſuch eaſy coincidencies of thought, as will happen to all who conſider the ſame ſubjects; or ſuch remarks on life or axioms of morality as float in converſation, and are tranſmitted through the world in proverbial ſentences.

I have found it remarked, that, in this important ſentence, *Go before, I'll follow*, we read a tranſlation of, *I prae, ſequar*. I have been told, that when *Caliban*, after a pleaſing dream, ſays, *I cry'd to ſleep again*, the authour imitates *Anacreon*, who had, like every other man, the ſame wiſh on the ſame occaſion.

There are a few paſſages which may paſs for imitations, but ſo few, that the exception only confirms the rule; he obtained them from accidental quotations, or by oral communication, and as he uſed what he had, would have uſed more if he had obtained it.

The *Comedy of Errors* is confeſſedly taken from the *Menæchmi* of *Plautus*; from the only play of *Plautus* which was then in *Engliſh*. What can be more probable, than that he who copied that, would have copied more; but that thoſe which were not tranſlated were inacceſſible?

Whether he knew the modern languages is uncertain. That his plays have ſome *French* ſcenes proves but little; he might eaſily procure them to be written, and probably, even though he had known the language in the common degree, he could not have written it without aſſiſtance. In the ſtory of *Romeo* and *Juliet* he is obſerved to have followed the *Engliſh* tranſlation, where it deviates from the *Italian*;

lian; but this on the other part proves nothing againſt his knowledge of the original. He was to copy, not what he knew himſelf, but what was known to his audience.

It is moſt likely that he had learned *Latin* ſufficiently to make him acquainted with conſtruction, but that he never advanced to an eaſy peruſal of the *Roman* authours. Concerning his ſkill in modern languages, I can find no ſufficient ground of determination; but as no imitations of *French* or *Italian* authours have been diſcovered, though the *Italian* poetry was then high in eſteem, I am inclined to believe, that he read little more than *Engliſh*, and choſe for his fables only ſuch tales as he found tranſlated.

That much knowledge is ſcattered over his works is very juſtly obſerved by *Pope*, but it is often ſuch knowledge as books did not ſupply. He that will underſtand *Shakeſpeare*, muſt not be content to ſtudy him in the cloſet, he muſt look for his meaning ſometimes among the ſports of the field, and ſometimes among the manufactures of the ſhop.

There is however proof enough that he was a very diligent reader, nor was our language then ſo indigent of books, but that he might very liberally indulge his curioſity without excurſion into foreign literature. Many of the *Roman* authours were tranſlated, and ſome of the *Greek*; the reformation had filled the kingdom with theological learning; moſt of the topicks of human diſquiſition had found *Engliſh* writers; and poetry had been cultivated, not

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only with diligence, but ſucceſs. This was a ſtock of knowledge ſufficient for a mind ſo capable of appropriating and improving it.

Bnt the greater part of his excellence was the product of his own genius. He found the *Engliſh* ſtage in a ſtate of the utmoſt rudeneſs; no eſſays either in tragedy or comedy had appeared, from which it could be diſcovered to what degree of delight either one or other might be carried. Neither character nor dialogue were yet underſtood. *Shakeſpeare* may be truly ſaid to have introduced them both amongſt us, and in ſome of his happier ſcenes to have carried them both to the utmoſt height.

By what gradations of improvement he proceeded, is not eaſily known; for the chronology of his works is yet unſettled. *Rowe* is of opinion, that *perhaps we are not to look for his beginning, like thoſe of other writers, in his leaſt perfect works; art had ſo little, and nature ſo large a ſhare in what he did, that for ought I know*, ſays he, *the performances of his youth, as they were the moſt vigorous, were the beſt.* But the power of nature is only the power of uſing to any certain purpoſe the materials which diligence procures, or opportunity ſupplies. Nature gives no man knowledge, and when images are collected by ſtudy and experience, can only aſſiſt in combining or applying them. *Shakeſpeare*, however favoured by nature, could impart only what he had learned; and as he muſt increaſe his ideas, like other mortals, by gradual acquiſition, he, like them, grew wiſer as he

grew older, could diſplay life better, as he knew it more, and inſtruct with more efficacy, as he was himſelf more amply inſtructed.

There is a vigilance of obſervation and accuracy of diſtinction which books and precepts cannot confer; from this almoſt all original and native excellence proceeds. *Shakeſpeare* muſt have looked upon mankind with perſpicacity, in the higheſt degree curious and attentive. Other writers borrow their characters from preceding writers, and diverſify them only by the accidental appendages of preſent manners; the dreſs is a little varied, but the body is the ſame. Our authour had both matter and form to provide; for except the characters of *Chaucer*, to whom I think he is not much indebted, there were no writers in *Engliſh*, and perhaps not many in other modern languages, which ſhewed life in its native colours.

The conteſt about the original benevolence or malignity of man had not yet commenced. Speculation had not yet attempted to analyſe the mind, to trace the paſſions to their ſources, to unfold the ſeminal principles of vice and virtue, or ſound the depths of the heart for the motives of action. All thoſe enquiries, which from that time that human nature became the faſhionable ſtudy, have been made ſometimes with nice diſcernment, but often with idle ſubtilty, were yet unattempted. The tales, with which the infancy of learning was ſatisfied, exhibited only the ſuperficial appearances of action, related

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the events but omitted the cauſes, and were formed for ſuch as delighted in wonders rather than in truth. Mankind was not then to be ſtudied in the cloſet; he that would know the world, was under the neceſſity of gleaning his own remarks, by mingling as he could in its buſineſs and amuſements.

Boyle congratulated himſelf upon his high birth, becauſe it favoured his curioſity, by facilitating his acceſs. *Shakeſpeare* had no ſuch advantage; he came to *London* a needy adventurer, and lived for a time by very mean employments. Many works of genius and learning have been performed in ſtates of life, that appear very little favourable to thought or to enquiry; ſo many, that he who conſiders them is inclined to think that he ſees enterpriſe and perſeverance predominating over all external agency, and bidding help and hindrance vaniſh before them. The genius of *Shakeſpeare* was not to be depreſſed by the weight of poverty, nor limited by the narrow converſation to which men in want are inevitably condemned; the incumbrances of his fortune were ſhaken from his mind, *as dewdrops from a lion's mane.*

Though he had ſo many difficulties to encounter, and ſo little aſſiſtance to ſurmount them, he has been able to obtain an exact knowledge of many modes of life, and many caſts of native diſpoſitions; to vary them with great multiplicity; to mark them by nice diſtinctions; and to ſhew them in full view by proper combinations. In this part of his performances he had none to imitate, but has himſelf been imitated

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by all ſucceeding writers; and it may be doubted, whether from all his ſucceſſors more maxims of theoretical knowledge, or more rules of practical prudence, can be collected, than he alone has given to his country.

Nor was his attention confined to the actions of men; he was an exact ſurveyor of the inanimate world; his deſcriptions have always ſome peculiarities, gathered by contemplating things as they really exiſt. It may be obſerved, that the oldeſt poets of many nations preſerve their reputation, and that the following generations of wit, after a ſhort celebrity, ſink into oblivion. The firſt, whoever they be, muſt take their ſentiments and deſcriptions immediately from knowledge; the reſemblance is therefore juſt, their deſcriptions are verified by every eye, and their ſentiments acknowledged by every breaſt. Thoſe whom their fame invites to the ſame ſtudies, copy partly them, and partly nature, till the books of one age gain ſuch authority, as to ſtand in the place of nature to another, and imitation, always deviating a little, becomes at laſt capricious and caſual. *Shakeſpeare*, whether life or nature be his ſubject, ſhews plainly, that he has ſeen with his own eyes; he gives the image which he receives, not weakened or diſtorted by the intervention of any other mind; the ignorant feel his repreſentations to be juſt, and the learned ſee that they are compleat.

Perhaps it would not be eaſy to find any authour, except *Homer*, who invented ſo much as *Shakeſpeare*, who

who ſo much advanced the ſtudies which he cultivated, or effuſed ſo much novelty upon his age or country. The form, the characters, the language, and the ſhows of the *Engliſh* drama are his. *He ſeems*, ſays *Dennis*, *to have been the very original of our* Engliſh *tragical harmony, that is, the harmony of blank verſe, diverſified often by diſſyllable and triſſyllable terminations. For the diverſity diſtinguiſhes it from heroick harmony, and by bringing it nearer to common uſe makes it more proper to gain attention, and more fit for action and dialogue. Such verſe we make when we are writing proſe; we make ſuch verſe in common converſation.*

I know not whether this praiſe is rigorouſly juſt. The diſſyllable termination, which the critick rightly appropriates to the drama, is to be found, though, I think, not in *Gorboduc* which is confeſſedly before our authour; yet in *Hieronnymo*, of which the date is not certain, but which there is reaſon to believe at leaſt as old as his earlieſt plays. This however is certain, that he is the firſt who taught either tragedy or comedy to pleaſe, there being no theatrical piece of any older writer, of which the name is known, except to antiquaries and collectors of books, which are ſought becauſe they are ſcarce, and would not have been ſcarce, had they been much eſteemed.

To him we muſt aſcribe the praiſe, unleſs *Spenſer* may divide it with him, of having firſt diſcovered to how much ſmoothneſs and harmony the *Engliſh* language could be ſoftened. He has ſpeeches, perhaps ſometimes ſcenes, which have all the delicacy of *Rowe*, without

without his effeminacy. He endeavours indeed commonly to ſtrike by the force and vigour of his dialogue, but he never executes his purpoſe better, than when he tries to ſooth by ſoftneſs.

Yet it muſt be at laſt confeſſed, that as we owe every thing to him, he owes ſomething to us; that, if much of his praiſe is paid by perception and judgement, much is likewiſe given by cuſtom and veneration. We fix our eyes upon his graces, and turn them from his deformities, and endure in him what we ſhould in another loath or deſpiſe. If we endured without praiſing, reſpect for the father of our drama might excuſe us; but I have ſeen, in the book of ſome modern critick, a collection of anomalies which ſhew that he has corrupted language by every mode of depravation, but which his admirer has accumulated as a monument of honour.

He has ſcenes of undoubted and perpetual excellence, but perhaps not one play, which, if it were now exhibited as the work of a contemporary writer, would be heard to the concluſion. I am indeed far from thinking, that his works were wrought to his own ideas of perfection; when they were ſuch as would ſatisfy the audience, they ſatisfied the writer. It is ſeldom that authours, though more ſtudious of fame than *Shakeſpeare*, riſe much above the ſtandard of their own age; to add a little to what is beſt will always be ſufficient for preſent praiſe, and thoſe who find themſelves exalted into fame, are willing to credit their encomiaſts, and to ſpare the labour of contending with themſelves.

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It does not appear, that *Shakeſpeare* thought his works worthy of poſterity, that he levied any ideal tribute upon future times, or had any further proſpect, than of preſent popularity and preſent profit. When his plays had been acted, his hope was at an end; he ſolicited no addition of honour from the reader. He therefore made no ſcruple to repeat the ſame jeſts in many dialogues, or to entangle different plots by the ſame knot of perplexity, which may be at leaſt forgiven him, by thoſe who recollect, that of *Congreve*'s four comedies, two are concluded by a marriage in a maſk, by a deception, which perhaps never happened, and which, whether likely or not, he did not invent.

So careleſs was this great poet of future fame, that, though he retired to eaſe and plenty, while he was yet little *declined into the vale of years*, before he could be diſguſted with fatigue, or diſabled by infirmity, he made no collection of his works, nor deſired to reſcue thoſe that had been already publiſhed from the depravations that obſcured them, or ſecure to the reſt a better deſtiny, by giving them to the world in their genuine ſtate.

Of the plays which bear the name of *Shakeſpeare* in the late editions, the greater part were not publiſhed till about ſeven years after his death, and the few which appeared in his life are apparently thruſt into the world without the care of the authour, and therefore probably without his knowledge.

Of all the publiſhers, clandeſtine or profeſſed, their negligence and unſkilfulneſs has by the late reviſers been ſufficiently ſhown. The faults of all are indeed numerous and groſs, and have not only corrupted many paſſages perhaps beyond recovery, but have brought others into ſuſpicion, which are only obſcured by obſolete phraſeology, or by the writer's unſkilfulneſs and affectation. To alter is more eaſy than to explain, and temerity is a more common quality than diligence. Thoſe who ſaw that they muſt employ conjecture to a certain degree, were willing to indulge it a little further. Had the authour publiſhed his own works, we ſhould have ſat quietly down to diſentangle his intricacies, and clear his obſcurities; but now we tear what we cannot looſe, and eject what we happen not to underſtand.

The faults are more than could have happened without the concurrence of many cauſes. The ſtile of *Shakeſpeare* was in itſelf ungrammatical, perplexed and obſcure; his works were tranſcribed for the players by thoſe who may be ſuppoſed to have ſeldom underſtood them; they were tranſmitted by copiers equally unſkilful, who ſtill multiplied errours; they were perhaps ſometimes mutilated by the actors, for the ſake of ſhortening the ſpeeches; and were at laſt printed without correction of the preſs.

In this ſtate they remained, not as Dr. *Warburton* ſuppoſes, becauſe they were unregarded, but becauſe the editor's art was not yet applied to modern languages, and our anceſtors were accuſtomed to ſo much

much negligence of *Engliſh* printers, that they could very patiently endure it. At laſt an edition was undertaken by *Rowe*; not becauſe a poet was to be publiſhed by a poet, for *Rowe* ſeems to have thought very little on correction or explanation, but that our authour's works might appear like thoſe of his fraternity, with the appendages of a life and recommendatory preface. *Rowe* has been clamorouſly blamed for not performing what he did not undertake, and it is time that juſtice be done him, by confeſſing, that though he ſeems to have had no thought of corruption beyond the printer's errours, yet he has made many emendations, if they were not made before, which his ſucceſſors have received without acknowledgment, and which, if they had produced them, would have filled pages and pages with cenſures of the ſtupidity by which the faults were committed, with diſplays of the abſurdities which they involved, with oſtentatious expoſitions of the new reading, and ſelf congratulations on the happineſs of diſcovering it.

Of *Rowe*, as of all the editors, I have preſerved the preface, and have likewiſe retained the authour's life, though not written with much elegance or ſpirit; it relates however what is now to be known, and therefore deſerves to paſs through all ſucceeding publications.

The nation had been for many years content enough with Mr. *Rowe*'s performance, when Mr. *Pope* made them acquainted with the true ſtate of *Shakeſpear*'s

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text, ſhewed that it was extremely corrupt, and gave reaſon to hope that there were means of reforming it. He collated the old copies, which none had thought to examine before, and reſtored many lines to their integrity; but, by a very compendious criticiſm, he rejected whatever he diſliked, and thought more of amputation than of cure.

I know not why he is commended by Dr. *Warburton* for diſtinguiſhing the genuine from the ſpurious plays. In this choice he exerted no judgement of his own; the plays which he received, were given by *Hemings* and *Condel*, the firſt editors; and thoſe which he rejected, though, according to the licentiouſneſs of the preſs in thoſe times, they were printed during *Shakeſpear*'s life, with his name, had been omitted by his friends, and were never added to his works before the edition of 1664, from which they were copied by the later printers.

This was a work which *Pope* ſeems to have thought unworthy of his abilities, being not able to ſuppreſs his contempt of *the dull duty of an editor*. He underſtood but half his undertaking. The duty of a collator is indeed dull, yet, like other tedious taſks, is very neceſſary; but an emendatory critick would ill diſcharge his duty, without qualities very different from dulneſs. In peruſing a corrupted piece, he muſt have before him all poſſibilities of meaning, with all poſſibilities of expreſſion. Such muſt be his comprehenſion of thought, and ſuch his copiouſneſs of language. Out of many readings poſſible, he muſt be able to

ſelect that which beſt ſuits with the ſtate, opinions, and modes of language prevailing in every age, and with his authour's particular caſt of thought, and turn of expreſſion. Such muſt be his knowledge, and ſuch his taſte. Conjectural criticiſm demands more than humanity poſſeſſes, and he that exerciſes it with moſt praiſe has very frequent need of indulgence. Let us now be told no more of the dull duty of an editor.

Confidence is the common conſequence of ſucceſs. They whoſe excellence of any kind has been loudly celebrated, are ready to conclude, that their powers are univerſal. *Pope*'s edition fell below his own expectations, and he was ſo much offended, when he was found to have left any thing for others to do, that he paſt the latter part of his life in a ſtate of hoſtility with verbal criticiſm.

I have retained all his notes, that no fragment of ſo great a writer may be loſt; his preface, valuable alike for elegance of compoſition and juſtneſs of remark, and containing a general criticiſm on his authour, ſo extenſive that little can be added, and ſo exact, that little can be diſputed, every editor has an intereſt to ſuppreſs, but that every reader would demand its inſertion.

Pope was ſucceeded by *Theobald*, a man of narrow comprehenſion and ſmall acquiſitions, with no native and intrinſick ſplendour of genius, with little of the artificial light of learning, but zealous for minute accuracy, and not negligent in purſuing it. He col-

lated the ancient copies, and rectified many errors. A man ſo anxiouſly ſcrupulous might have been expected to do more, but what little he did was commonly right.

In his reports of copies and editions he is not to be truſted, without examination. He ſpeaks ſometimes indefinitely of copies, when he has only one. In his enumeration of editions, he mentions the two firſt folios as of high, and the third folio as of middle authority; but the truth is, that the firſt is equivalent to all others, and that the reſt only deviate from it by the printer's negligence. Whoever has any of the folios has all, excepting thoſe diverſities which mere reiteration of editions will produce. I collated them all at the beginning, but afterwards uſed only the firſt.

Of his notes I have generally retained thoſe which he retained himſelf in his ſecond edition, except when they were confuted by ſubſequent annotators, or were too minute to merit preſervation. I have ſometimes adopted his reſtoration of a comma, without inſerting the panegyrick in which he celebrated himſelf for his atchievement. The exuberant excreſcence of diction I have often lopped, his triumphant exultations over *Pope* and *Rowe* I have ſometimes ſuppreſſed, and his contemptible oſtentation I have frequently concealed; but I have in ſome places ſhewn him, as he would have ſhewn himſelf, for the reader's diverſion, that the inflated emptineſs of ſome notes may juſtify or excuſe the contraction of the reſt.

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Theobald, thus weak and ignorant, thus mean and faithleſs, thus petulant and oſtentatious, by the good luck of having *Pope* for his enemy, has eſcaped, and eſcaped alone, with reputation, from this undertaking. So willingly does the world ſupport thoſe who ſolicite favour, againſt thoſe who command reverence; and ſo eaſily is he praiſed, whom no man can envy.

Our authour fell then into the hands of Sir *Thomas Hanmer*, the *Oxford* editor, a man, in my opinion, eminently qualified by nature for ſuch ſtudies. He had, what is the firſt requiſite to emendatory criticiſm, that intuition by which the poet's intention is immediately diſcovered, and that dexterity of intellect which diſpatches its work by the eaſieſt means. He had undoubtedly read much; his acquaintance with cuſtoms, opinions, and traditions, ſeems to have been large; and he is often learned without ſhew. He ſeldom paſſes what he does not underſtand, without an attempt to find or to make a meaning, and ſometimes haſtily makes what a little more attention would have found. He is ſolicitous to reduce to grammar, what he could not be ſure that his authour intended to be grammatical. *Shakeſpeare* regarded more the ſeries of ideas, than of words; and his language, not being deſigned for the reader's deſk, was all that he deſired it to be, if it conveyed his meaning to the audience.

Hanmer's care of the metre has been too violently cenſured. He found the meaſures reformed in ſo many paſſages, by the ſilent labours of ſome editors,

with the ſilent acquieſcence of the reſt, that he thought himſelf allowed to extend a little further the licenſe, which had already been carried ſo far without reprehenſion; and of his corrections in general, it muſt be confeſſed, that they are often juſt, and made commonly with the leaſt poſſible violation of the text.

But, by inſerting his emendations, whether invented or borrowed, into the page, without any notice of varying copies, he has appropriated the labour of his predeceſſors, and made his own edition of little authority. His confidence indeed, both in himſelf and others, was too great; he ſuppoſes all to be right that was done by *Pope* and *Theobald*; he ſeems not to ſuſpect a critick of fallibility, and it was but reaſonable that he ſhould claim what he ſo liberally granted.

As he never writes without careful enquiry and diligent conſideration, I have received all his notes, and believe that every reader will wiſh for more.

Of the laſt editor it is more difficult to ſpeak. Reſpect is due to high place, tenderneſs to living reputation, and veneration to genius and learning; but he cannot be juſtly offended at that liberty of which he has himſelf ſo frequently given an example, nor very ſolicitous what is thought of notes, which he ought never to have conſidered as part of his ſerious employments, and which, I ſuppoſe, ſince the ardour of compoſition is remitted, he no longer numbers among his happy effuſions.

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The original and predominant errour of his commentary, is acquieſcence in his firſt thoughts; that precipitation which is produced by conſciouſneſs of quick diſcernment; and that confidence which preſumes to do, by ſurveying the ſurface, what labour only can perform, by penetrating the bottom. His notes exhibit ſometimes perverſe interpretations, and ſometimes improbable conjectures; he at one time gives the authour more profundity of meaning than the ſentence admits, and at another diſcovers abſurdities, where the ſenſe is plain to every other reader. But his emendations are likewiſe often happy and juſt; and his interpretation of obſcure paſſages learned and ſagacious.

Of his notes, I have commonly rejected thoſe, againſt which the general voice of the publick has exclaimed, or which their own incongruity immediately condemns, and which, I ſuppoſe, the authour himſelf would deſire to be forgotten. Of the reſt, to part I have given the higheſt approbation, by inſerting the offered reading in the text; part I have left to the judgment of the reader, as doubtful, though ſpecious; and part I have cenſured without reſerve, but I am ſure without bitterneſs of malice, and, I hope, without wantonneſs of inſult.

It is no pleaſure to me, in reviſing my volumes, to obſerve how much paper is waſted in confutation. Whoever conſiders the revolutions of learning, and the various queſtions of greater or leſs importance, upon which wit and reaſon have exerciſed their powers,

muſt lament the unſucceſsfulneſs of enquiry, and the ſlow advances of truth, when he reflects, that great part of the labour of every writer is only the deſtruction of thoſe that went before him. The firſt care of the builder of a new ſyſtem, is to demoliſh the fabricks which are ſtanding. The chief deſire of him that comments an authour, is to ſhew how much other commentators have corrupted and obſcured him. The opinions prevalent in one age, as truths above the reach of controverſy, are confuted and rejected in another, and riſe again to reception in remoter times. Thus the human mind is kept in motion without progreſs. Thus ſometimes truth and errour, and ſometimes contrarieties of errour, take each others place by reciprocal invaſion. The tide of ſeeming knowledge which is poured over one generation, retires and leaves another naked and barren; the ſudden meteors of intelligence which for a while appear to ſhoot their beams into the regions of obſcurity, on a ſudden withdraw their luſtre, and leave mortals again to grope their way.

Theſe elevations and depreſſions of renown, and the contradictions to which all improvers of knowledge muſt for ever be expoſed, ſince they are not eſcaped by the higheſt and brighteſt of mankind, may ſurely be endured with patience by criticks and annotators, who can rank themſelves but as the ſatellites of their authours. How canſt thou beg for life, ſays *Achilles* to his captive, when thou knoweſt that thou art now to ſuffer only what muſt another day be ſuffered by *Achilles*?

Dr.

Dr. *Warburton* had a name ſufficient to confer celebrity on thoſe who could exalt themſelves into antagoniſts, and his notes have raiſed a clamour too loud to be diſtinct. His chief aſſailants are the authours of *the Canons of criticiſm* and of the *Review of* Shakeſpeare's *text*; of whom one ridicules his errours with airy petulance, ſuitable enough to the levity of the controverſy; the other attacks them with gloomy malignity, as if he were dragging to juſtice an aſſaſſin or incendiary. The one ſtings like a fly, ſucks a little blood, takes a gay flutter, and returns for more; the other bites like a viper, and would be glad to leave inflammations and gangrene behind him. When I think on one, with his confederates, I remember the danger of *Coriolanus*, who was afraid that *girls with ſpits, and boys with ſtones, ſhould ſlay him in puny battle*; when the other croſſes my imagination, I remember the prodigy in *Macbeth*,

An eagle tow'ring in his pride of place,
Was by a mouſing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.

Let me however do them juſtice. One is a wit, and one a ſcholar. They have both ſhewn acuteneſs ſufficient in the diſcovery of faults, and have both advanced ſome probable interpretations of obſcure paſſages; but when they aſpire to conjecture and emendation, it appears how falſely we all eſtimate our own abilities, and the little which they have been able to perform might have taught them more candour to the endeavours of others.

Before Dr. *Warburton*'s edition, *Critical obſervations on* Shakeſpeare had been publiſhed by Mr. *Upton*, a man ſkilled in languages, and acquainted with books, but who ſeems to have had no great vigour of genius or nicety of taſte. Many of his explanations are curious and uſeful, but he likewiſe, though he profeſſed to oppoſe the licentious confidence of editors, and adhere to the old copies, is unable to reſtrain the rage of emendation, though his ardour is ill ſeconded by his ſkill. Every cold empirick, when his heart is expanded by a ſucceſsful experiment, ſwells into a theoriſt, and the laborious collator at ſome unlucky moment frolicks in conjecture.

Critical, hiſtorical and explanatory notes have been likewiſe publiſhed upon *Shakeſpeare* by Dr. *Grey*, whoſe diligent peruſal of the old *Engliſh* writers has enabled him to make ſome uſeful obſervations. What he undertook he has well enough performed, but as he neither attempts judicial nor emendatory criticiſm, he employs rather his memory than his ſagacity. It were to be wiſhed that all would endeavour to imitate his modeſty who have not been able to ſurpaſs his knowledge.

I can ſay with great ſincerity of all my predeceſſors, what I hope will hereafter be ſaid of me, that not one has left *Shakeſpeare* without improvement, nor is there one to whom I have not been indebted for aſſiſtance and information. Whatever I have taken from them it was my intention to refer to its original authour, and it is certain, that what I have not

given

given to another, I believed when I wrote it to be my own. In ſome perhaps I have been anticipated; but if I am ever found to encroach upon the remarks of any other commentator, I am willing that the honour, be it more or leſs, ſhould be transferred to the firſt claimant, for his right, and his alone, ſtands above diſpute; the ſecond can prove his pretenſions only to himſelf, nor can himſelf always diſtinguiſh invention, with ſufficient certainty, from recollection.

They have all been treated by me with candour, which they have not been careful of obſerving to one another. It is not eaſy to diſcover from what cauſe the acrimony of a ſcholiaſt can naturally proceed. The ſubjects to be diſcuſſed by him are of very ſmall importance; they involve neither property nor liberty; nor favour the intereſt of ſect or party. The various readings of copies, and different interpretations of a paſſage, ſeem to be queſtions that might exerciſe the wit, without engaging the paſſions. But, whether it be, that *ſmall things make mean men proud*, and vanity catches ſmall occaſions; or that all contrariety of opinion, even in thoſe that can defend it no longer, makes proud men angry; there is often found in commentaries a ſpontaneous ſtrain of invective and contempt, more eager and venomous than is vented by the moſt furious controvertiſt in politicks againſt thoſe whom he is hired to defame.

Perhaps the lightneſs of the matter may conduce to the vehemence of the agency; when the truth to

be

be inveſtigated is ſo near to inexiſtence, as to eſcape attention, its bulk is to be enlarged by rage and exclamation: That to which all would be indifferent in its original ſtate, may attract notice when the fate of a name is appended to it. A commentator has indeed great temptations to ſupply by turbulence what he wants of dignity, to beat his little gold to a ſpacious ſurface, to work that to foam which no art or diligence can exalt to ſpirit.

The notes which I have borrowed or written are either illuſtrative, by which difficulties are explained; or judicial, by which faults and beauties are remarked; or emendatory, by which depravations are corrected.

The explanations tranſcribed from others, if I do not ſubjoin any other interpretation, I ſuppoſe commonly to be right, at leaſt I intend by acquieſcence to confeſs, that I have nothing better to propoſe.

After the labours of all the editors, I found many paſſages which appeared to me likely to obſtruct the greater number of readers, and thought it my duty to facilitate their paſſage. It is impoſſible for an expoſitor not to write too little for ſome, and too much for others. He can only judge what is neceſſary by his own experience; and how long ſoever he may deliberate, will at laſt explain many lines which the learned will think impoſſible to be miſtaken, and omit many for which the ignorant will want his help. Theſe are cenſures merely relative, and muſt be quietly endured.

endured. I have endeavoured to be neither ſuperfluouſly copious, nor ſcrupulouſly reſerved, and hope that I have made my authour's meaning acceſſible to many who before were frighted from peruſing him, and contributed ſomething to the publick, by diffuſing innocent and rational pleaſure.

The compleat explanation of an authour not ſyſtematick and conſequential, but deſultory and vagrant, abounding in caſual alluſions and light hints, is not to be expected from any ſingle ſcholiaſt. All perſonal reflections, when names are ſuppreſſed, muſt be in a few years irrecoverable oblitterated; and cuſtoms, too minute to attract the notice of law, ſuch as modes of dreſs, formalities of converſation, rules of viſits, diſpoſition of furniture, and practices of ceremony, which naturally find places in familiar dialogue, are ſo fugitive and unſubſtantial, that they are not eaſily retained or recovered. What can be known, will be collected by chance, from the receſſes of obſcure and obſolete papers, peruſed commonly with ſome other view. Of this knowledge every man has ſome, and none has much; but when an authour has engaged the publick attention, thoſe who can add any thing to his illuſtration, communicate their diſcoveries, and time produces what had eluded diligence.

To time I have been obliged to reſign many paſſages, which, though I did not underſtand them, will perhaps hereafter be explained, having, I hope, illuſtrated ſome, which others have neglected or miſtaken, ſometimes by ſhort remarks, or marginal directions,

rections, ſuch as every editor has added at his will, and often by comments more laborious than the matter will ſeem to deſerve; but that which is moſt difficult is not always moſt important, and to an editor nothing is a trifle by which his authour is obſcured.

The poetical beauties or defects I have not been very diligent to obſerve. Some plays have more, and ſome fewer judicial obſervations, not in proportion to their difference of merit, but becauſe I gave this part of my deſign to chance and to caprice. The reader, I believe, is ſeldom pleaſed to find his opinion anticipated; it is natural to delight more in what we find or make, than in what we receive. Judgement, like other faculties, is improved by practice, and its advancement is hindered by ſubmiſſion to dictatorial deciſions, as the memory grows torpid by the uſe of a table book. Some initiation is however neceſſary; of all ſkill, part is infuſed by precept, and part is obtained by habit; I have therefore ſhewn ſo much as may enable the candidate of criticiſm to diſcover the reſt.

To the end of moſt plays, I have added ſhort ſtrictures, containing a general cenſure of faults, or praiſe of excellence; in which I know not how much I have concurred with the current opinion; but I have not, by any affectation of ſingularity, deviated from it. Nothing is minutely and particularly examined, and therefore it is to be ſuppoſed, that in the plays which are condemned there is much to be praiſed,

praiſed, and in theſe which are praiſed much to be condemned.

The part of criticiſm in which the whole ſucceſſion of editors has laboured with the greateſt diligence, which has occaſioned the moſt arrogant oſtentation, and excited the keeneſt acrimony, is the emendation of corrupted paſſages, to which the publick attention having been firſt drawn by the violence of the contention between *Pope* and *Theobald*, has been continued by the perſecution, which, with a kind of conſpiracy, has been ſince raiſed againſt all the publiſhers of *Shakeſpeare*.

That many paſſages have paſſed in a ſtate of depravation through all the editions is indubitably certain; of theſe the reſtoration is only to be attempted by collation of copies or ſagacity of conjecture. The collator's province is ſafe and eaſy, the conjecturer's perilous and difficult. Yet as the greater part of the plays are extant only in one copy, the peril muſt not be avoided, nor the difficulty refuſed.

Of the readings which this emulation of amendment has hitherto produced, ſome from the labours of every publiſher I have advanced into the text; theſe are to be conſidered as in my opinion ſufficiently ſupported; ſome I have rejected without mention, as evidently erroneous; ſome I have left in the notes without cenſure or approbation, as reſting in equipoiſe between objection and defence; and ſome, which ſeemed ſpecious but not right, I have inſerted with a ſubſequent animadverſion.

Having claſſed the obſervations of others, I was at laſt to try what I could ſubſtitute for their miſtakes, and how I could ſupply their omiſſions. I collated ſuch copies as I could procure, and wiſhed for more, but have not found the collectors of theſe rarities very communicative. Of the editions which chance or kindneſs put into my hands I have given an enumeration, that I may not be blamed for neglecting what I had not the power to do.

By examining the old copies, I ſoon found that the later publiſhers, with all their boaſts of diligence, ſuffered many paſſages to ſtand unauthoriſed, and contented themſelves with *Rowe*'s regulation of the text, even where they knew it to be arbitrary, and with a little conſideration might have found it to be wrong. Some of theſe alterations are only the ejection of a word for one that appeared to him more elegant or more intelligible. Theſe corruptions I have often ſilently rectified; for the hiſtory of our language and the true force of our words, can only be preſerved, by keeping the text of authours free from adulteration. Others, and thoſe very frequent, ſmoothed the cadence, or regulated the meaſure; on theſe I have not exerciſed the ſame rigour; if only a word was tranſpoſed, or a particle inſerted or omitted, I have ſometimes ſuffered the line to ſtand; for the inconſtancy of the copies is ſuch, as that ſome liberties may be eaſily permitted. But this practice I have not ſuffered to proceed far, having reſtored the primitive diction wherever it could for any reaſon be preferred.

The

The emendations, which compariſon of copies ſupplied, I have inſerted in the text; ſometimes where the improvement was ſlight, without notice, and ſometimes with an account of the reaſons of the change.

Conjecture, though it be ſometimes unavoidable, I have not wantonly nor licentiouſly indulged. It has been my ſettled principle, that the reading of the ancient books is probably true, and therefore is not to be diſturbed for the ſake of elegance, perſpicuity, or mere improvement of the ſenſe. For though much credit is not due to the fidelity, nor any to the judgement of the firſt publiſhers, yet they who had the copy before their eyes were more likely to read it right, than we who only read it by imagination. But it is evident that they have often made ſtrange miſtakes by ignorance or negligence, and that therefore ſomething may be properly attempted by criticiſm, keeping the middle way between preſumption and timidity.

Such criticiſm I have attempted to practiſe, and where any paſſage appeared inextricably perplexed, have endeavoured to diſcover how it may be recalled to ſenſe, with leaſt violence. But my firſt labour is, always to turn the old text on every ſide, and try if there be any interſtice, through which light can find its way; nor would *Huetius* himſelf condemn me, as refuſing the trouble of reſearch, for the ambition of alteration. In this modeſt induſtry I have not been unſucceſsful. I have reſcued many lines

from

from the violations of temerity, and ſecured many ſcenes from the inroads of correction. I have adopted the *Roman* ſentiment, that it is more honourable to ſave a citizen, than to kill an enemy, and have been more careful to protect than to attack.

I have preſerved the common diſtribution of the plays into acts, though I believe it to be in almoſt all the plays void of authority. Some of thoſe which are divided in the later editions have no diviſion in the firſt folio, and ſome that are divided in the folio have no diviſion in the preceding copies. The ſettled mode of the theatre requires four intervals in the play, but few, if any, of our authour's compoſitions can be properly diſtributed in that manner. An act is ſo much of the drama as paſſes without intervention of time or change of place. A pauſe makes a new act. In every real, and therefore in every imitative action, the intervals may be more or fewer, the reſtriction of five acts being accidental and arbitrary. This *Shakeſpeare* knew, and this he practiſed; his plays were written, and at firſt printed in one unbroken continuity, and ought now to be exhibited with ſhort pauſes, interpoſed as often as the ſcene is changed, or any conſiderable time is required to paſs. This method would at once quell a thouſand abſurdities.

In reſtoring the authour's works to their integrity, I have conſidered the punctuation as wholly in my power; for what could be their care of colons and commas, who corrupted words and ſentences. Whatever could be done by adjuſting points is therefore ſilently

ſilently performed, in ſome plays with much diligence, in others with leſs; it is hard to keep a buſy eye ſteadily fixed upon evaneſcent atoms, or a diſcurſive mind upon evaneſcent truth.

The ſame liberty has been taken with a few particles, or other words of ſlight effect. I have ſometimes inſerted or omitted them without notice. I have done that ſometimes, which the other editors have done always, and which indeed the ſtate of the text may ſufficiently juſtify.

The greater part of readers, inſtead of blaming us for paſſing trifles, will wonder that on mere trifles ſo much labour is expended, with ſuch importance of debate, and ſuch ſolemnity of diction. To theſe I anſwer with confidence, that they are judging of an art which they do not underſtand; yet cannot much reproach them with their ignorance, nor promiſe that they would become in general, by learning criticiſm, more uſeful, happier or wiſer.

As I practiſed conjecture more, I learned to truſt it leſs; and after I had printed a few plays, reſolved to inſert none of my own readings in the text. Upon this caution I now congratulate myſelf, for every day encreaſes my doubt of my emendations.

Since I have confined my imagination to the margin, it muſt not be conſidered as very reprehenſible, if I have ſuffered it to play ſome freaks in its own dominion. There is no danger in conjecture, if it be propoſed as conjecture; and while the text remains uninjured, thoſe changes may be ſafely offered, which

are not conſidered even by him that offers them as neceſſary or ſafe.

If my readings are of little value, they have not been oſtentatiouſly diſplayed or importunately obtruded. I could have written longer notes, for the art of writing notes is not of difficult attainment. The work is performed, firſt by railing at the ſtupidity, negligence, ignorance, and aſinine taſteleſſneſs of the former editors, and ſhewing, from all that goes before and all that follows, the inelegance and abſurdity of the old reading; then by propoſing ſomething, which to ſuperficial readers would ſeem ſpecious, but which the editor rejects with indignation; then by producing the true reading, with a long paraphraſe, and concluding with loud acclamations on the diſcovery, and a ſober wiſh for the advancement and proſperity of genuine criticiſm.

All this may be done, and perhaps done ſometimes without impropriety. But I have always ſuſpected that the reading is right, which requires many words to prove it wrong; and the emendation wrong, that cannot without ſo much labour appear to be right. The juſtneſs of a happy reſtoration ſtrikes at once, and the moral precept may be well applied to criticiſm, *quod dubitas ne feceris.*

To dread the ſhore which he ſees ſpread with wrecks, is natural to the ſailor. I had before my eye, ſo many critical adventures ended in miſcarriage, that caution was forced upon me. I encountered in every page Wit ſtruggling with its own ſophiſtry, and

Learning

Learning confuſed by the multiplicity of its views. I was forced to cenſure thoſe whom I admired, and could not but reflect, while I was diſpoſſeſſing their emendations, how ſoon the ſame fate might happen to my own, and how many of the readings which I have corrected may be by ſome other editor defended and eſtabliſhed.

Criticks, I ſaw, that other's names efface,
And fix their own, with labour, in the place;
Their own, like others, ſoon their place reſign'd,
Or diſappear'd, and left the firſt behind. POPE.

That a conjectural critick ſhould often be miſtaken, cannot be wonderful, either to others or himſelf, if it be conſidered, that in his art there is no ſyſtem, no principal and axiomatical truth that regulates ſubordinate poſitions. His chance of errour is renewed at every attempt; an oblique view of the paſſage, a ſlight miſapprehenſion of a phraſe, a caſual inattention to the parts connected, is ſufficient to make him not only fail, but fail ridiculouſly; and when he ſucceeds beſt, he produces perhaps but one reading of many probable, and he that ſuggeſts another will always be able to diſpute his claims.

It is an unhappy ſtate, in which danger is hid under pleaſure. The allurements of emendation are ſcarcely reſiſtible. Conjecture has all the joy and all the pride of invention, and he that has once ſtarted a happy change, is too much delighted to conſider what objections may riſe againſt it.

Yet conjectural criticiſm has been of great uſe in the learned world; nor is it my intention to depreciate a ſtudy, that has exerciſed ſo many mighty minds, from the revival of learning to our own age, from the Biſhop of *Aleria* to Engliſh *Bentley*. The criticks on ancient authours have, in the exerciſe of their ſagacity, many aſſiſtances, which the editor of *Shakeſpeare* is condemned to want. They are employed upon grammatical and ſettled languages, whoſe conſtruction contributes ſo much to perſpicuity, that *Homer* has fewer paſſages unintelligible than *Chaucer*. The words have not only a known regimen, but invariable quantities, which direct and confine the choice. There are commonly more manuſcripts than one; and they do not often conſpire in the ſame miſtakes. Yet *Scaliger* could confeſs to *Salmaſius* how little ſatisfaction his emendations gave him. *Illudunt nobis conjecturæ noſtræ, quarum nos pudet, poſteaquam in meliores codices incidimus.* And *Lipſius* could complain, that criticks were making faults, by trying to remove them, *Ut olim vitiis, ita nunc remediis laboratur.* And indeed, where mere conjecture is to be uſed, the emendations of *Scaliger* and *Lipſius*, notwithſtanding their wonderful ſagacity and erudition, are often vague and diſputable, like mine or *Theobald*'s.

Perhaps I may not be more cenſured for doing wrong, than for doing little; for raiſing in the publick expectations, which at laſt I have not anſwered. The expectation of ignorance is indefinite, and that of

of knowledge is often tyrannical. It is hard to ſatisfy thoſe who know not what to demand, or thoſe who demand by deſign what they think impoſſible to be done. I have indeed diſappointed no opinion more than my own; yet I have endeavoured to perform my taſk with no ſlight ſolicitude. Not a ſingle paſſage in the whole work has appeared to me corrupt, which I have not attempted to reſtore; or obſcure, which I have not endeavoured to illuſtrate. In many I have failed like others; and from many, after all my efforts, I have retreated, and confeſſed the repulſe. I have not paſſed over, with affected ſuperiority, what is equally difficult to the reader and to myſelf, but where I could not inſtruct him, have owned my ignorance. I might eaſily have accumulated a maſs of ſeeming learning upon eaſy ſcenes; but it ought not to be imputed to negligence, that, where nothing was neceſſary, nothing has been done, or that, where others have ſaid enough, I have ſaid no more.

Notes are often neceſſary, but they are neceſſary evils. Let him, that is yet unacquainted with the powers of *Shakeſpeare*, and who deſires to feel the higheſt pleaſure that the drama can give, read every play from the firſt ſcene to the laſt, with utter negligence of all his commentators. When his fancy is once on the wing, let it not ſtoop at correction or explanation. When his attention is ſtrongly engaged, let it diſdain alike to turn aſide to the name of *Theobald* and *Pope*. Let him read on through brightneſs

and

and obſcurity, through integrity and corruption; let him preſerve his comprehenſion of the dialogue and his intereſt in the fable. And when the pleaſures of novelty have ceaſed, let him attempt exactneſs; and read the commentators.

Particular paſſages are cleared by notes, but the general effect of the work is weakened. The mind is refrigerated by interruption; the thoughts are diverted from the principal ſubject; the reader is weary, he ſuſpects not why; and at laſt throws away the book, which he has too diligently ſtudied.

Parts are not to be examined till the whole has been ſurveyed; there is a kind of intellectual remoteneſs neceſſary for the comprehenſion of any great work in its full deſign and its true proportions; a cloſe approach ſhews the ſmaller niceties, but the beauty of the whole is diſcerned no longer.

It is not very grateful to conſider how little the ſucceſſion of editors has added to this authour's power of pleaſing. He was read, admired, ſtudied, and imitated, while he was yet deformed with all the improprieties which ignorance and neglect could accumulate upon him; while the reading was yet not rectified, nor his alluſions underſtood; yet then did *Dryden* pronounce "that *Shakeſpeare* was the man, "who, of all modern and perhaps ancient poets, "had the largeſt and moſt comprehenſive ſoul. All "the images of nature were ſtill preſent to him, "and he drew them not laborioufly, but luckily: "When he deſcribes any thing, you more than ſee "it,

" it, you feel it too. Thoſe who accuſe him to
" have wanted learning, give him the greater com-
" mendation: he was naturally learned: he needed
" not the ſpectacles of books to read nature; he
" looked inwards, and found her there. I cannot
" ſay he is every where alike; were he ſo, I ſhould
" do him injury to compare him with the greateſt
" of mankind. He is many times flat and inſipid;
" his comick wit degenerating into clenches, his ſe-
" rious ſwelling into bombaſt. But he is always
" great, when ſome great occaſion is preſented to
" him: No man can ſay, he ever had a fit ſubject
" for his wit, and did not then raiſe himſelf as high
" above the reſt of poets,

" *Quantum lenta ſolent inter viburna cupreſſi.*"

It is to be lamented, that ſuch a writer ſhould want a commentary; that his language ſhould become obſolete, or his ſentiments obſcure. But it is vain to carry wiſhes beyond the condition of human things; that which muſt happen to all, has happened to *Shakeſpeare*, by accident and time; and more than has been ſuffered by any other writer ſince the uſe of types, has been ſuffered by him through his own negligence of fame, or perhaps by that ſuperiority of mind, which deſpiſed its own performances, when it compared them with its powers, and judged thoſe works unworthy to be preſerved, which the criticks of following ages were to contend for the fame of reſtoring and explaining.

Among theſe candidates of inferiour fame, I am now to ſtand the judgment of the publick; and wiſh that I could confidently produce my commentary as equal to the encouragement which I have had the honour of receiving. Every work of this kind is by its nature deficient, and I ſhould feel little ſolicitude about the ſentence, were it to be pronounced only by the ſkilful and the learned.

FINIS.

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